

Earlier this month I participated in a very interesting conference in Switzerland sponsored by the Hewlett foundation. A dozen leaders of higher education in Europe (mostly rectors and vice-chancellors of major European universities) spent several days with a small delegation from the U.S. (including Frank Rhodes, David Gardner, Stan Ikenberry, Chang-Lin Tien, and me) to discuss the future of the university.

There was a rather surprising level of agreement on just how rapid and radically changes were occurring in higher education. (As Frank Rhodes put it, "I feel like a dinosaur looking up at an approaching asteroid!") Although different institutions and nations face different constraints and options, the general level of agreement on the forces driving change and possible consequences for the university (and the academy) was quite striking.

There is a growing dialog concerning these issues at the national and international level (e.g., the Pew Roundtable and Knight Collaborative, the National Center for Postsecondary Education Improvement, a soon-to-be-launched commission at the National Academy of Sciences, and so on). Both as a flagship public university and a leading research university, Michigan should be a major player in these discussions. But it is not apparent where such activities would occur at the University of Michigan. Are interested students and faculty located in traditional places like the School of Education, School of Information, or School of Public Policy Studies? Or is some other kind of interdisciplinary framework necessary.

If you have some time this summer, I would like to come over to explore some of these issues with you. I'm sending over by campus mail a copy of the paper I presented in Switzerland (although it is quite similar to others presented at the conference).

Some key questions:

What role should the University of Michigan play in such a dialog? After all, we are the nation's leading research university (in research volume), with one of its largest and most distinguished graduate schools?

Where should we engage this issue?

In each school and college?

In cross-disciplinary areas such as Rackham?

Others?

What are the implications for graduate education, scholarship, and faculty?

COSEPUP studies (PhDs, Postdocs, non-tenure-track faculty)

(the migrant workers of academic research)

Experiments

Encourage experimentation with new paradigms of learning, research, and service by harvesting the best ideas from within the academy (or elsewhere), implementing them on a sufficient scale to assess their impact, and disseminating their results.

Examples: MVAC  
MVU  
Cyberschool  
Alumni College

Alliances?

Place a far greater emphasis on building alliances among institutions that will allow individual institutions to focus on core competencies while relying on alliances to address the broader and diverse needs of society. Here alliances should be encouraged not only among institutions of higher education (e.g., partnering research universities with liberal arts colleges and community colleges) but also between higher education and the private sector (e.g., information technology and entertainment companies). Differentiation among institutions should be encouraged, while relying upon market forces rather than regulations to discourage duplication.